

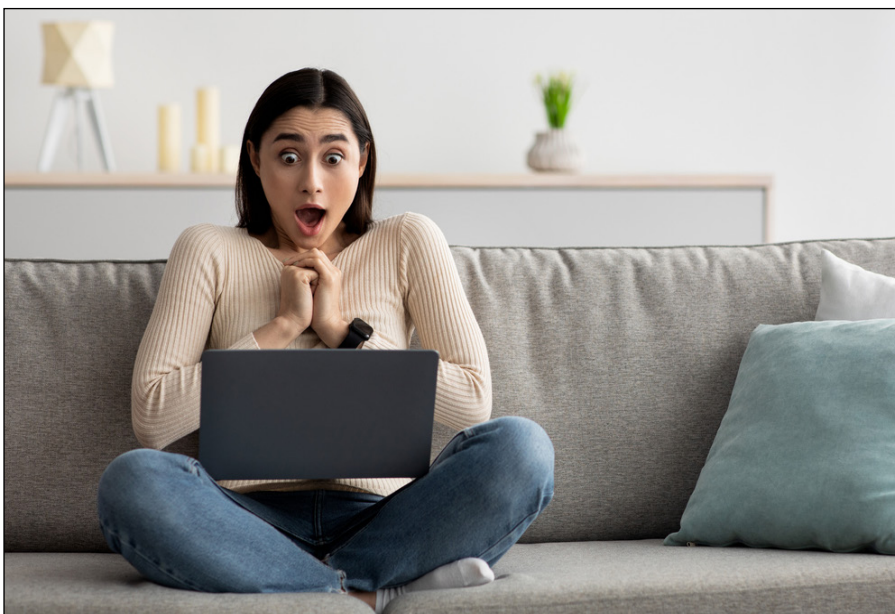
Surprising ATS enrollment records still set during difficult times

By TOM TANNER

“The problem with optimists is that they can never be pleasantly surprised.” Maybe that’s why I don’t consider myself an optimist. While not a pessimist either, I am more than pleasantly surprised by the current state of ATS schools. After four decades in graduate theological education, I see many reasons to rejoice in what God is doing among us. I have visited scores of schools during my 10 years at ATS and almost always come away thanking God for the amazing work they are doing—now more than ever.

No doubt, the last few years have been extraordinarily challenging—with a worldwide pandemic, stories of social injustices, and a polarized populace struggling with basic civil discourse. Still, I see so many signs of God moving among our schools in innovative and inspiring ways. I read report after report of good schools doing better, hear story after story of struggling seminaries seemingly resurrected. This article focuses on just one small area of optimism—seven surprising ATS enrollment records.

What is perhaps most surprising is that ATS schools are setting *any* enrollment records in these difficult days.



The larger context of higher education is really rather discouraging—at least in the US in the last decade (Canadian trends are more encouraging; see [Statista report](#)). Prior to 2010, US colleges set enrollment records nearly every year, growing by 52% from 1990 to 2010 (see [Education Data](#))—one of the longest sustained increases in US history. ATS enrollments reflected those golden

years, growing 38% between 1990 and 2006, peaking that year at 81,180 (see [ATS Annual Data Tables](#)).

But higher education in the US has been down significantly since 2010, with the Great Recession of 2008–2009 marking a major pivot

point. From 2010 to 2021, college enrollment decreased almost every year by a total of 18%—likely, the longest sustained decline in US history with no end in sight (see [Fall 2012 Enrollment Report](#) [Fall 2010 data], [Spring](#)

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2021 Enrollment Report, and [Colleges Face Reckoning](#)). What is surprising—even amazing—is that while most of higher education spent the last decade in record decline, ATS enrollment¹ actually grew 4% (from 75,751 in 2010 to 78,635 this year).

Just since the pandemic began, US colleges have lost more than one million students: undergraduate and graduate, private and public (see [More Than 1 Million Fewer Students](#) and [Enrollment Marches Downward](#)). In those same two years, ATS schools² have added nearly one thousand students. That unprecedented decline in US enrollment makes the following seven ATS enrollment records even more surprising.

1 Record number of degree-seeking students

ATS schools enrolled 73,889 degree-seeking students this academic year (2021–2022)—the most in the Association’s 123-year history. To be certain, the highest number of *all* ATS students was 81,180 in 2006, but nearly 10,000 of those were non-degree students—in an era when such students were counted rather inconsistently (one school reported a decline of more than 1,200 non-degree students in just one year).

So, the ATS peak enrollment of 2006 may need an asterisk, with only 71,208 degree-seeking students—2,681 fewer than this year. And this year’s total enrollment of 78,635 is still the third highest in ATS history—behind only 2006 and 2007. As noted, since 2010—just after the Great Recession—ATS total enrollment has risen 4%, while total US college enrollment has fallen 18%.

1 ATS enrollments always reflect the changing nature of our membership. In the 2006 peak enrollment year, for example, ATS had 245 member schools, while this year 272 schools are members. Since 2010, 41 schools have joined ATS, while 18 have closed (12) or withdrawn (6); another 32 ATS schools have merged in ways that allow them to continue their missions and serve their constituencies. In the last five years, [one large school](#) joined ATS, which influenced some of the numbers reported here.

2 The large school noted above joined ATS in 2018, so its addition did not significantly affect the growth that ATS schools experienced in the last two years during the pandemic.

2 Record number of degrees granted to students

ATS schools awarded 16,486 degrees this past year—the most in ATS history and 16% more than the peak enrollment year of 2006. This past year’s record is nearly 2,100 more degrees than ATS schools awarded just five years ago—despite a pandemic during much of that time. Even more surprising is that nearly half of all ATS graduates (46%) are MA graduates, while only 37% are MDiv graduates. In fact, ATS schools have graduated more MA than MDiv graduates every year since 2016 (see #3 below). Regardless, ATS schools are sending more students “into the field” with completed degrees than at any time in our history—and through a variety of innovative degree programs.

3 Record number of MA students

ATS schools enrolled 27,191 MA students this year—the most ever and up 18% in the last five years (up 32% since the 2006 enrollment peak). The MA has grown so quickly that it now nearly equals MDiv enrollment³ at 29,100—down 17% since its peak in 2006 and about the same now as in 1997. MA students currently account for 37% of all degree-seeking students, compared to 39% for MDiv students. To be sure, total MDiv credit hours⁴ still far exceed total MA credits (259,924 vs. 181,538) but, for the first time, MDiv credit hours represent less than half (48%) of all credit hours (total credits for all degrees are 5% higher in the last five years, compared to an 8% growth in headcount).

3 Previous *Colloquy Online* articles have documented the shift from MDiv to MA in recent years; e.g., [Master’s Enrollment: A Changing Landscape](#) by Chris Meinzer (April 2018) and [Reports of the MDiv’s Death Are Greatly Exaggerated](#) by Tom Tanner (January 2019).

4 The term “credit hours” is used here as a more reliable measure than “full-time equivalency” (FTE) because schools report FTE in various ways for various degrees. The ATS Annual Report Forms (see next-to-last line in [Form EF-1](#)) have collected data on credit hours since 2014.

4 Record number of DMin students

ATS schools enrolled 10,252 DMin students this year—the most ever, up 18% in the last five years. Half of that increase has been since 2020, when ATS members approved the new *Standards of Accreditation* with more flexibility in DMin admissions (Standard 5.5). DMin enrollment had dropped to 8,696 in 2018—the lowest since 2001—making its recent growth even more remarkable. The DMin degree is also the only degree now with nearly as many students of color (48%) as white students (52%). Black students account for 25% of all DMin students whose race and ethnicity are known (see #6 below), compared to 16% of all such ATS students.

5 Record number of older students

ATS schools enrolled 19,556 students over the age of 50 this year—

the first time more students are over 50 than under 30. Students in their 20s total 19,404, down 20% from 2010. That should not be surprising, given the 18% decline since 2010 in overall college enrollment—most in their 20s.

Students in their 30s still constitute the largest ATS age group at 20,833, but that group has grown by only 8% in the last five years, while students older than 50 have grown by 24%. Those in their 40s have grown even more, up 25% since 2017 (14,058 to 16,913).

6 Record number of students of color

ATS schools enrolled 24,397 students of color this year—39% of all ATS students whose race and ethnicity are known.⁵ That is the most ever, up 38% since 2010. Since 2017, enrollment for all students of

color has increased 16%, with the three largest groups at their highest levels ever—9,990 Black students (up 12%), 6,982 Asian students (up 24%), and 5,790 Hispanic students (up 13%). The number of white students has declined 12% since 2010, though up 2% since 2017. Students of color here do not include international students, categorized as “Visa or Nonresident Alien,” as their races and ethnicities are unknown. ATS schools reported only 6,715 international students this year—a 17% drop since the 2017 peak of 8,087, and likely the largest decline in ATS history.

The prolonged pandemic has undoubtedly been a factor, though international students among all US colleges actually increased last fall by 4% after a 15% drop in 2020, the first year of the pandemic (see *Open Doors*

report). Part of the difficulty in tracking international students is that ATS does not collect data on non-North American students studying online at ATS schools, only those studying onsite in the US or Canada. So, the pandemic

may have pushed many international students online in ways not reflected in these ATS data.

7 Record number of online students

This last record should not be surprising, but it is a bit confusing. During the height of the pandemic in 2020, ATS schools reported 47,492 online students. That was a record—a 42% increase in just one year— but still only 60% of total ATS enrollment in fall 2020, when most ATS schools were still online. That suggests some confusion in how online students were reported then.

Even the optimists among us may be pleasantly surprised by these seven enrollment records. Amid unprecedented challenges, it is encouraging to hear some good news and to see these ways that God is at work in our schools.

⁵ Each year, about 20% of all ATS students are not identified by their races or ethnicities. In Canada, for example, many ATS schools do not report those categories due to longstanding concerns in that country regarding student privacy issues. In addition, the ATS Annual Report Forms do not ask schools to identify the race or ethnicity (or even country) of international students categorized as “Visa or Nonresident Alien,” or those who live temporarily in the US or Canada while studying at an ATS school.

Without the pandemic effect of 2020, this year's 39,825 online students would be a record, an increase of 72% (!) a little more than just five years ago.

The 2020 pandemic record aside, this year is also the first time more than half (51%) of all ATS students took at least one course online (the Association's definition of an online student). Five years ago, only 32% did. One has to wonder, though, how reliable any reports on "online" students may be anymore, when so many switch between various modalities, sometimes on a weekly basis.

Summary

Even the optimists among us may be pleasantly surprised by these seven enrollment records. Amid unprecedented challenges, it is encouraging to hear some good news and to see these ways that God is at work in our schools. Whether small or large, ATS schools are rising to the occasion and participating in God's amazing grace in amazing ways. In the end, however, records don't really matter. What matters is that God finds us faithful, and I believe He still does. That is reason to rejoice.



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